

Comprehension through Pictures

By Antonio R. Roldan Tapia

Often we hear our students complain that although they understand a reading passage, they cannot answer the comprehension questions correctly, because they do not know the right words, or they simply make a mistake in writing. As teachers, we may have comprehension in mind, but we are testing it by means of production usually through writing. It is important to remember what is meant by comprehension: The process by which a person understands the meaning of written or spoken language. (Richards, Platt and Weber 1985:54)

In other words, comprehension does not go any further than understanding a piece of language, whereas answering comprehension questions requires production and entails different strategies.

My proposal is to use pictures for checking comprehension. In my personal experience, drawing or using pictures avoids all kinds of problems which could arise with production. At the same time, they seem to be more highly motivating than the traditional techniques for measuring comprehension.

I am going to present three different passages that I have used in class for the last three years.

The monster. The students draw a "monster" according to the physical description given in the reading text. The students should be as imaginative as possible but stay within the description of the text. The core of the vocabulary will be parts of the body and adjectives of size and shape. The structure "have/has," location words (*right, left, top* , etc.), numbers, comparatives, and some prepositions will also play a part in the passage.

"The monster has a big head. It has a little mouth, a small nose and three eyes. The eye in the middle is much bigger than the others. It has a long neck that is a bit fat. The right arm is longer than the left one. The right hand has three fingers and the left one has six. The monster has five legs. The outer legs, both right and left, are thick The one in the middle is very thin and the other two are normal size. Its short tail is furry at the end."

Once their drawings are finished, a few minutes should be devoted to classroom presentation. Satisfaction and fun result. Students enjoy looking at what their classmates have done.

The room. Another passage may be given to the students where a description of a room is given. The vocabulary of furniture is essential as well as prepositions. The structure there *is/are* will be widely used, too.

This is the sitting-room in my friend's house. There is a large table in the middle surrounded by four chairs. On the right side of the room, there is a television and a cupboard with three shelves. There is a nice vase with flowers on the bottom shelf and a fishbowl on the top. On the left side of the room, there is a hi-fi set. A mirror is over the set. There is a carpet under the table and usually the cat is sleeping there.

Again, all the drawings should include the same pieces of furniture but they will have a slightly different look, depending on their creator. The students should share their drawings with the whole class before evaluation.

Buildings. This final text is quite similar to the one above. The students will be given a paragraph which locates a good number of buildings on any main street of a town or city. Consequently, the vocabulary has to include all the "facilities" a person may use in daily life: a post office, a church, a bank, a supermarket, a public library, a school, a theatre, etc. It is obvious that prepositions will also be necessary.

"This is old Market Hill. At the bottom, is Market Square, and Queen's Walk is just at the top. At the bottom right corner, there is a travel agency. Just opposite it, is the supermarket. Next to it, is a large school that extends to the next corner. Halfway to the top of the hill there is a zebra crossing and a traffic light. Nearby is the main post office. Between the post office and the travel agency, there is a new fast food restaurant. Behind the post office, there is a very nice park where we usually go for a walk."

Once more the students' imaginations will play an important role in the activity. Presentation before the whole group and evaluation follow.

More Than Meets the Eye

This type of activity holds rich potential not only for English comprehension skills but also for meeting broader educational goals. I make the following observations to show how pictures offer both students and teachers more than meets the eye:

- Evaluating comprehension through pictures can be adapted for higher or lower levels, using authentic materials for advanced groups and simplified texts for beginners.
- If the students are young and absolute beginners, colouring the drawings will work as a hook to catch their interest.
- The activity fosters motivation because it allows a desirable amount of freedom.
- In a teaching situation where there is a shortage of materials, drawing is one of the least expensive and easiest things to do.
- If we want to use dictation, the students can be asked to make a drawing instead of writing down what they are listening to.
- If we want to do a writing activity, we can provide students with a picture and ask them to write a description. Therefore, any drawing may become a two-way instrument a final output in a comprehension activity or a stimulating input for production.

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References

- Richards, J., J. Platt, and H. Weber. 1985. Longman dictionary of applied linguistics. Harlow, Essex: Longman.